

Story and photos

By Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Todd Oliver, SETAF Public Affairs

Spc. Tihomir Todorov says the most impressive thing about him is that he has a master's degree in Bulgarian law.

And it is impressive. Not many, if any, of the enlisted paratroopers of the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade, have a law degree. What sets him further apart however, is that not only does he have a law degree, it's that he just left northern Iraq for the United States, via Vicenza to become an American citizen.

"The most impressive thing about me is that I have a master's degree in Bulgarian Law," Todorov said. "Law school was a mistake. I did it to cause a fight with my father, who was an officer in the Bulgarian army. During my law school education I realized I wanted to be a soldier also.

"I didn't want to be a soldier in the Bulgarian army. The Bulgarian army is more of a defensive army."

So Todorov looked around and considered his options. The French Foreign Legion seemed appealing.

"I was thinking about joining the French Foreign Legion and I talked to the recruiter in Strasbourg, France," he said. "I started to study French quite a bit and I thought they were the only option."

But there were a too many things the foreign legion recruiter told him that he just didn't care for.

"First there is a total lack of freedom in the French Foreign Legion," Todorov said. "The first year you have just 14 days of leave off post. And that time has to be spent at their recreation facility. For the first three years you cannot leave France, you cannot own a car and you cannot be married."

Todorov also lamented the fact that there was no mechanism in place to become an officer as his father had been. All those things changed his mind about a career in the legion.

On his bus trip back to Bulgaria, Todorov hit some low points.

"All the way back I thought I was a coward, telling myself I was a coward for not accepting the challenge," he said.

"I even considered joining the Russian army, maybe fighting in Chechnya against the rebels," he said.

Back in Bulgaria he started his law career, practicing for a year.

Meanwhile Todorov's wife was living in New York City. As a student with a green card Todorov was also entitled to a green card. He decided to travel across the Atlantic to visit.

"I decided to go to New York and the first day, when I was walking around I saw a recruiter in the subway station and I asked him if it was possible to join the U.S. Army. I was pretty sure it was impossible," he said.

The recruiter asked if he had a green card and of course he did.

"I was surprised and I decided that was exactly what I wanted to do. I asked if I could become a paratrooper, I was surprised that I could," he said.

About one month later Todorov raised his right hand and took the oath, enlisting into the army, much to the chagrin of his wife, Anna.

"Oh she got mad," he said with a laugh. "We lived with an American family our first month in America and they wanted me to start a law career there. I could have studied for a few months and passed the bar exam but I didn't want to be a lawyer, I wanted to be a paratrooper. Maybe later I will work as a lawyer, but not right now."

Todorov is on his way back to the United States to become a citizen. He falls under the umbrella of a presidential Executive Order, which grants citizenship to all soldiers serving since September 11, 2001.

"I'm not really prepared, I don't even know all of the national anthem. I need to do a lot of studying," he said.

Todorov likens the process of becoming a citizen to that of going to the promotion board, a test of skill and knowledge for any soldier that wishes to join the ranks of Non-Commissioned Officer.

One advantage Todorov may have that most don't is that he can appear in uniform.

"I'd like to go through with my combat infantrymen's badge and all that but no orders yet," he said.

Once the process over, Todorov hopes to join the Special Forces.

"First thing I want to do is volunteer for the Green Berets, after that maybe I will put in my package for officer candidate school. Maybe I will be an officer in the Green Beret or in the infantry, combat arms either way."

“My father was an artillery officer. He is still alive but he has a drinking problem, its terrible. We don’t talk much. I only see him once a year for a few hours. I cannot stay around him for long periods of time,” he said.

Todorov did spend a year and a half in the Bulgarian Army as a conscript, serving with the air defense.

“It’s a tough military, the punishments over there are much more brutal,” he said. “I was in trouble several times, it was almost imprisonment and real hard labor. Legally, the officers and non-commissioned officers cannot hit you, but they do.”

There are some things that Todorov feels are better in the Bulgarian military then in the U.S. Army. He still prefers the AK-47 to the M16 or M4.

“I’ll give you an example, when we dropped into the mud on Bashur Airfield I would guess that many of our weapons had problems. They’re sophisticated weapons—they’re very good weapons—but they are not that great in muddy warfare.

That’s not to say that life here is in anyway bad.

“What I’ve seen in the American military exceeded my expectation. I expected the same stupidity that I had seen in the Bulgarian army. Don’t get me wrong, you get some stupid stuff here too, but it’s much, much, much better then in any other army in the world.”

To the other soldiers in the brigade, and in the U.S. Army, who are looking to become citizens, Todorov has some advice.

“Start early,” he said. “I have some friends who have been in America for 10 years or more and still don’t have their paperwork squared away. Start early.”